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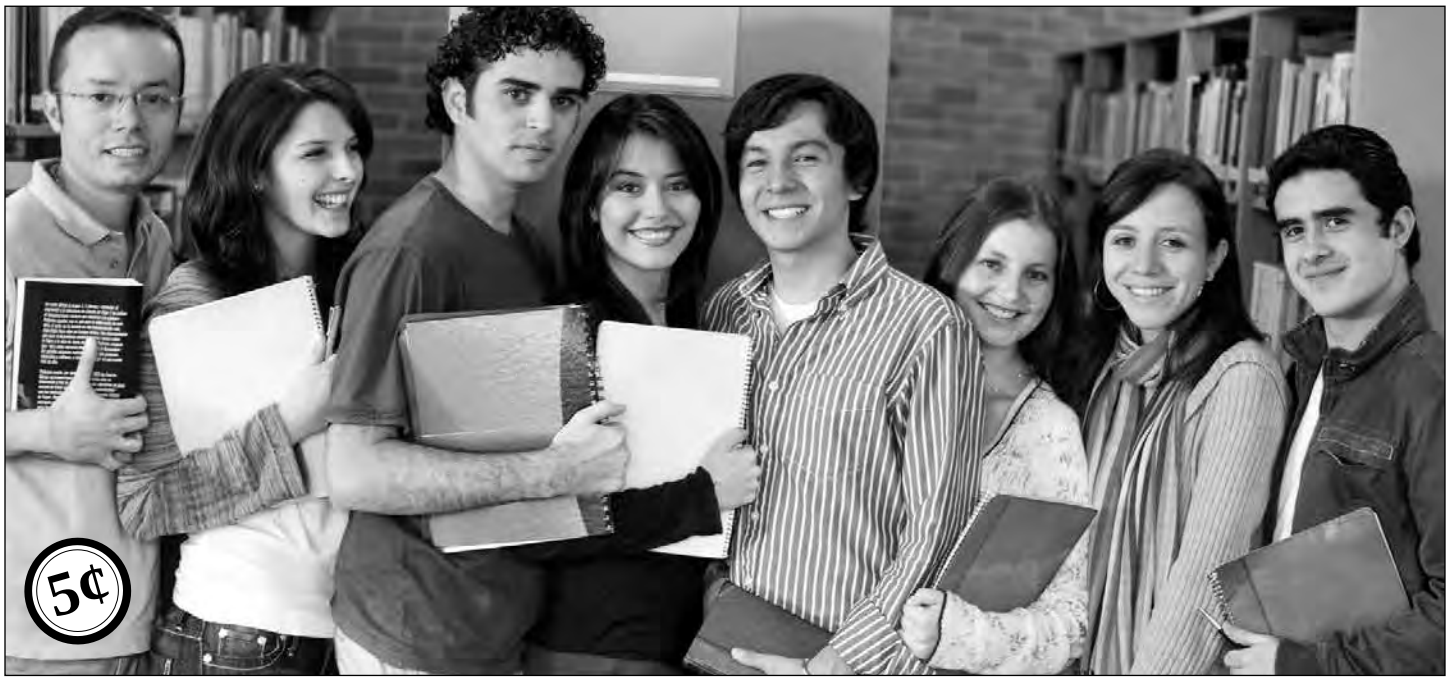

Creative Joy: Process and Product

Lead the Way
Feature Article

By Jan Seale

My junior high teaching job came up suddenly when a family move left me unemployed. On the spur of the moment, I was hired to teach eighth-grade language arts in an age when classes were heavily ability-grouped. There were 12 ability-grouped classes in language arts in this junior high, with the 801s considered the best. You can probably guess what the most recent hire was assigned—yes, the 812s.

My class was a mixture of those students whose parents refused to let them be in a special-ed class, brand-new monolingual-in-Spanish immigrants from Mexico, and older teenagers who had regularly been taken out of school to follow the crops.

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There were hardly any materials, just one workbook for grammar. The supervisor for language arts was as bewildered as I was about what to do with this group. I soon put the workbooks in the corner and began to improvise.

As primitive as this may sound, I finagled old filmstrips from the librarian, took them home and dipped them in bleach to get rid of the images, and brought them back to the classroom where the students drew pictures and words on them. We then ran the strips through a hand-cranked projector for a program of sorts. But the most successful project was writing and producing a school newspaper. My students really took to this. My one requirement was that all the copy had to be written in English. The boys drew fabulous pictures of motorcycles and labeled the parts. The girls collected dedications of songs from the student body. Some furnished recipes. I still have my recipe from Elva, a thoughtful girl bussed in every day from the King Ranch. It's titled "How to Cook a Cow's Head in a Pit."

There were also essays. One Robert wrote was a narrative about getting into trouble with his father and then getting out of it again. Because he had a flair for the narrative and was one of my best writers, I sought to correct one of Robert's sentences by putting in the margin the comment "Awkward, try this again." When Robert received his marked paper, he waited patiently beside my desk to talk to me. I still remember how he leaned down and said quietly and very respectfully, "Miss, my name is not Awkward. My name is Robert."

Jan Seale, the 2012 Texas Poet Laureate, has experienced teaching English in Texas at the junior high, high school, and college levels. She is the author of books of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction and is an artist-in-education with the Texas Commission on the Arts, as well as a member of the Humanities Texas Speakers Bureau. She can be reached at janseale@rgv.rr.com.

"Chance favors the prepared mind," Louis Pasteur wisely observed. The Eureka! moment often comes during sleep or when reading unrelated material. Einstein had a breakthrough one day with his theory of relativity when he was simply observing a passing train. Descartes is said to have produced Cartesian geometry by observing the movements of a fly on the wall of his bedroom. And we have Percy Spencer, a military engineer, to thank for the microwave, brought about when he was working on a radar set and noticed that a candy bar had melted in his pocket.

Well, the newspaper was a great hit. The students sold it for a nickel at lunchtime and had lots of sales, mainly because we had no doors on our classrooms and the lunch line queued up outside my classroom at the period when my 812s met.

That was long ago, and still in my memory are the names and faces of those students—struggling, trying hard, hopefully learning some English, and teaching me as well. They were perhaps my greatest teaching challenge and whatever they learned, bunched together as they were, they learned through the practice of creativity.

All creators go through six stages of creativity, whether they are inventors, scientists, entrepreneurs, educators, writers, or artists. You can apply these stages in your classroom as well as in your personal life.

Stage one in the creative process can be seen as the "aha moment." A creation is born in at least two different ways. In the "purposefully directed" instance, the idea comes from the outside, such as when you give your students a project or assignment. In that case, there's an initial idea presented and how it will be implemented is the excitement, the discovery of stage one. In the "improvisationally directed," the would-be creator thinks up the idea. The person has some kind of innate urge to combine certain things or express an idea. Here the idea comes initially from the student, possibly prompted by some subject being considered in the classroom.

The creative act may be a beautiful artistic thing, or on a more everyday level, it may come from a problem that needs to be solved, a deficiency that needs to be filled, or a challenge that needs to be met. Either way, stage one, the aha moment, is important to the whole process.

In the best lesson plans, there will be both purposefully directed and improvisationally directed assignments. Sometimes creative projects need limiting; otherwise, they will just spin off into chaos. With other assignments, it's important to allow the student to run with his or her aha moment—even if the product from this kind of assignment will be harder to evaluate. Here is where your wisdom as a teacher is needed. Thinking through your assignments, you decide how much you want to influence a creative assignment.

Stage two, the "easy does it time," is the first period of real work on a creative project. It is usually fast, with more questions, leading to some research, which in turn produces more questions. Insights may come quickly, with options piling up. There's often a feeling of euphoria. "Isn't this fun! I'm succeeding! It will happen!" can be heard throughout the classroom. If the project is being completed in collaborative groups, you have no doubt observed stage two in your students when they gather together. There's often crackling excitement, a couple of students jumping up and down with the adrenalin of ideas, a struggle to get organized, to pick a leader.

Stage three, a second period of work, might be dubbed the "hanging in there time." Here, willpower has to kick in. There's deeper inquiry—with harder questions. How will this be different from what's already been done? How will the story end? What is the focus of the poem? Organization begins in earnest. Willpower has been called the greatest human strength, and in this third stage of creative effort, its presence will determine whether the project comes to fruition.

Stage four is the "stumped" period. Lucky is the person or group with a creative project that has not encountered a time of difficulty in succeeding. The premise may seem doubtful, the timing wrong, the materials unavailable. For the writer, the heroine of the story in progress begins to act out, or there is no rhyming word available to match up with another at a crucial place in the poem. Perhaps for the first time, you as a teacher may have to step in to a group project. Tempted as you may be to offer an instant solution, it's wise to let the problem or difficulty bubble for a while. Your role is to encourage alternatives, problem-solving, and cooperation. Sooner or later, the creative problem will yield to solution. The main ingredients here are courage and patience, along with keeping the project in mind so the subconscious can work and the conscious mind can recognize solutions.

As for the stumped phase in individual creators, I want to interject an interesting consideration here. At about ten years of age, the corpus callosum, which is the rope-like bundle of neural tissue between the left and right brain segments, finally becomes fully functional. It facilitates communication between the right and left brain hemispheres. (The "soft-spot" on a baby's head is the

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declivity left for the corpus callosum to fill up.) When the right and left brain hemispheres are fully connected, the left brain—with its logical, rational, judgmental thinking—begins to exercise influence over the right brain.

Up until this time, the right brain has enjoyed a period of invention, fantasy, and imagination—with very pleasurable creativity. We see evidence in the wild freedom of young children when they play or when they work on an art project. Now, at about fourth grade, the left brain may tell the right brain that the picture being drawn is awful, that the story being written is dumb, that the game just invented is stupid. A wise teacher will notice when a child repeatedly starts over, wadding up the drawing or the story and tossing it in the wastebasket. Just going over the six steps of creating something in a simplified way, pausing to emphasize the "stumped" period, is often enough to help the child see what's happening and move past it. Those children who can overcome the heavy left-brain emphasis on order, judgment, competition, winning, and doing things to please others will retain the ability to move on out to a life of enjoyment as creative people.

Stage five, the "Eureka! moment," is the moment that artistic creators are seeking—as well as those in the major research fields of science, medicine, business, social work, and education. Not consistently, but sometimes the breakthrough comes at an unexpected moment, when it seems the mind is resting or preoccupied with other things.

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Depending on the complexity of the project, it may be that after the Eureka! moment, the creator will return to stage two, the first flash of work, and repeat the stages through stage five until the project is complete. You can see how this would readily work for writing a novel, where each chapter has to be worked through and new situations and conflicts figured out.

Stage six, to put it in a literary term, is the "denouement." It's the mop-up, being faithful in the carry-through, honoring the details. The creator can finally see the light. Sharing the work may be implicit in the finish. Receiving comments may provoke new ideas for future creativity.

As you become aware of the six steps of creativity, practice applying them *creatively* in your classroom and in your personal and family life. Devise ways to let your students experience the six steps of creativity. Will the creative project be purposefully directed by you, or will you throw the net broadly and let students take it from there? Can you counsel the impatient and the discouraged to see a work through? Can you help a child or a group salvage a wrong turn and learn from it?

At every step, emphasize the pleasure of creating. Process is so important. Find as many ways as possible to help kids love the process. If a student learns to take pleasure in the "doing," such character traits as patience, happiness, and self-control will be forming. When I asked a writer to comment on creative structure in his home as he was growing up, he said, "Oh, I don't know. We all just did whatever was fun for us."

Our educational system is geared toward results, and of course, those are important. But we need to keep always in mind that the student is living a life now, as a fully entitled human being, not just as a preliminary form of human life that must be changed, molded, trained, prepared, and filled. So we show our students that what they did *today* on their project was satisfying in itself; we ask them to notice the fun of it, to realize that creating is a special human gift available to us all. Sometimes the process is hard, the work arduous, but in the end, we should all *feel better* for having entered into the creative process.

Avoid distinctions between "creative" and "not creative." Someone quipped, "Trying to pin down creativity is like trying to nail Jello to the wall." Creators in the arts are often singled out as the only creative people in our midst. Others say, "Oh, I'm not creative."

But everyone is born with creativity. It may not be the creativity of the arts, or of performance. Yet we all, each one of us, live our daily lives on a layer of universal creativity—every piece of clothing, kitchen gadget, fixture, piece of furniture, communication item, and means of transportation had to be invented, created by someone. We don't doubt the creativity of millions of people unknown personally to us.

And we shouldn't doubt our own because creativity is a component of human nature, whether it's used for "high art" or for getting along in our everyday world. Cake mixes first came on the market in the 1930s and they did fairly well, but in the 1950s, there was a slump. What had gone wrong? Contrary to the myth that women wanted to add eggs and other ingredients so they could feel more

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creative, what really saved cake mixes was the invention of canned frostings. Women wanted to decorate their plain cake-mix cakes. They pored over magazine directions for making medieval castles, football fields, and three-ring circuses, and the cake mix was saved from extinction.

Creativity bids us to see things in a new way—to go beyond the information given, recombining, thinking in unconventional ways, using little known or neglected means. To be clinical, it starts in the frontal lobe, that part of the brain which has the boundless capacity to dream up things. Feeding our own creativity both in the classroom and away from it makes us happier people and better teachers. Creating alongside our students gives them powerful examples when they see we are unafraid to write a quatrain or a sonnet and furthermore, that we are enjoying the process.

Our own personal bliss is enhanced when we make something. A commercial artist, defining the pleasure of creativity, noted it as "that soul-filling feeling that you get when creativity is really flowing. Sometimes you get it gardening, or painting, or decorating for Christmas. It's that pure fun feeling when you're making something out of nothing. It's just coming out of you with no resistance."

Albert Einstein gave a challenge to parents and teachers: "It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge." There is nothing quite like the high of being "in flow." Time passes without notice. Life goes on around. The passion of creation takes center stage. The fun of it buoys one along.

Catching the brightness, the soulfulness, the sheer happiness of making art is of inestimable value to any human. For the young, it may be enough to inform a lifetime.

Creating is finding the sweet spot.